

Oppose doctor-assisted suicide

“What’s in a name?” Shakespeare places that question on the lips of the star-crossed lover, Juliet. “That which we call a rose would smell as sweet by any other name,” she goes on to say.

This is also a question you and I should ask, but for a very different reason. In the United States there is a very powerful group that goes by the name of “Compassion and Choices.” Judging only by the name, it sounds like a good-hearted organization. Who could be against compassion? And who could be against helping people know and understand their options? What, indeed, is in a name?

In reality, Compassion and Choices is not a new organization but an old one that formerly went by the name “Hemlock Society.” Hemlock was the poison that the philosopher, Socrates, unwisely drank in order to commit suicide. The old name tells us much more about the organization than its new name: Compassion and Choices is wholly dedicated to legalizing doctor-assisted suicide. The compassion it offers is suicide. The choice it offers is death.

Wearing its new and deceptive moniker, Compassion and Choices has mounted a formidable campaign to legalize doctor-assisted suicide throughout the U.S. and beyond. Compassion and Choices turns up at community health fairs and public libraries. It is well-funded and politically savvy. And, unfortunately, it has succeeded in California, Colorado, and Washington, D.C. In 2017, it is targeting Maryland and seven other states. Let us make no mistake: Compassion and Choices is out to legalize doctor-assisted suicide throughout the United States. We can also be sure that these proponents of the “throwaway culture” will share their playbook with other countries so as to spread their hopeless message everywhere.

As we prepare once again to march for the cause of life, let us also focus on how we should respond to this unfolding threat to the life and dignity of the frail elderly, the terminally and chronically ill, the handicapped and those who suffer from depression. Just as we seek to protect the lives of unborn children and to reach out to their mothers with genuine compassion, so too we need to reach out as never before to the vulnerable with a true compassion that protects their lives and dignity against the onslaught of doctor-assisted suicide. So how can we, as proponents of life, successfully stem the tide of this manifestation of the culture of death?

The starting point for our efforts is confidence in the church's teaching on the dignity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. To be sure, there are a lot of people in the U.S. and beyond who, if asked, would support doctor-assisted suicide because they value the ability to make choices, that is, to control one's destiny, and because they think it is the only way to end suffering. But there are a lot of other people who are rightly convinced that life is God's precious gift to be respected and that we are called to live each day with dignity. For that reason helping those who are handicapped, sick or dying to take their own lives is morally unacceptable. Instead, we are encouraged to alleviate their sufferings and to walk with them in love until the moment of natural death. Let me add that the church's teaching corresponds to a deep-seated instinct in every person to preserve his or her own life. Indeed, "we are the stewards, not the owners, of the life God has entrusted to us" (CCC, no. 2280).

Rooting ourselves in church teaching and resolved to live each day with an authentic sense of our God-given dignity, let us be bold, courageous, and loving in pointing out how uncompassionate doctor-assisted suicide really is.

I encourage you to advocate for true compassion by opposing any proposals to legalize doctor-assisted suicide in Maryland. That's true compassion. That's the right choice.